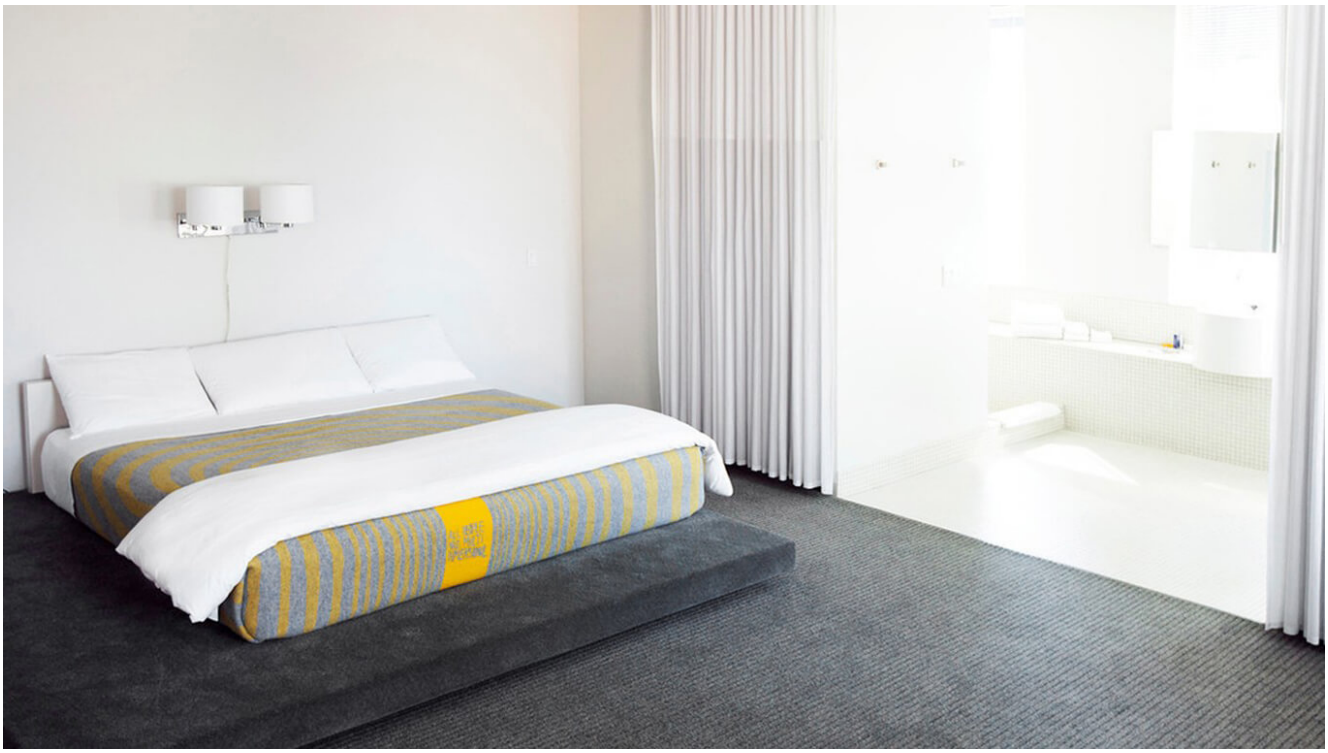
REVIEW: The Standard Downtown LA

I’m an LA native, but that doesn’t keep me from having constant Staycation’s when i’m in my own city. I usually opt for the Ritz-Carlton in Marina Del Rey, due to its 24 hour hot tub and pool area, and its prime beach location on the Marina, but every now and then I opt to visit the Standard in Downtown LA.

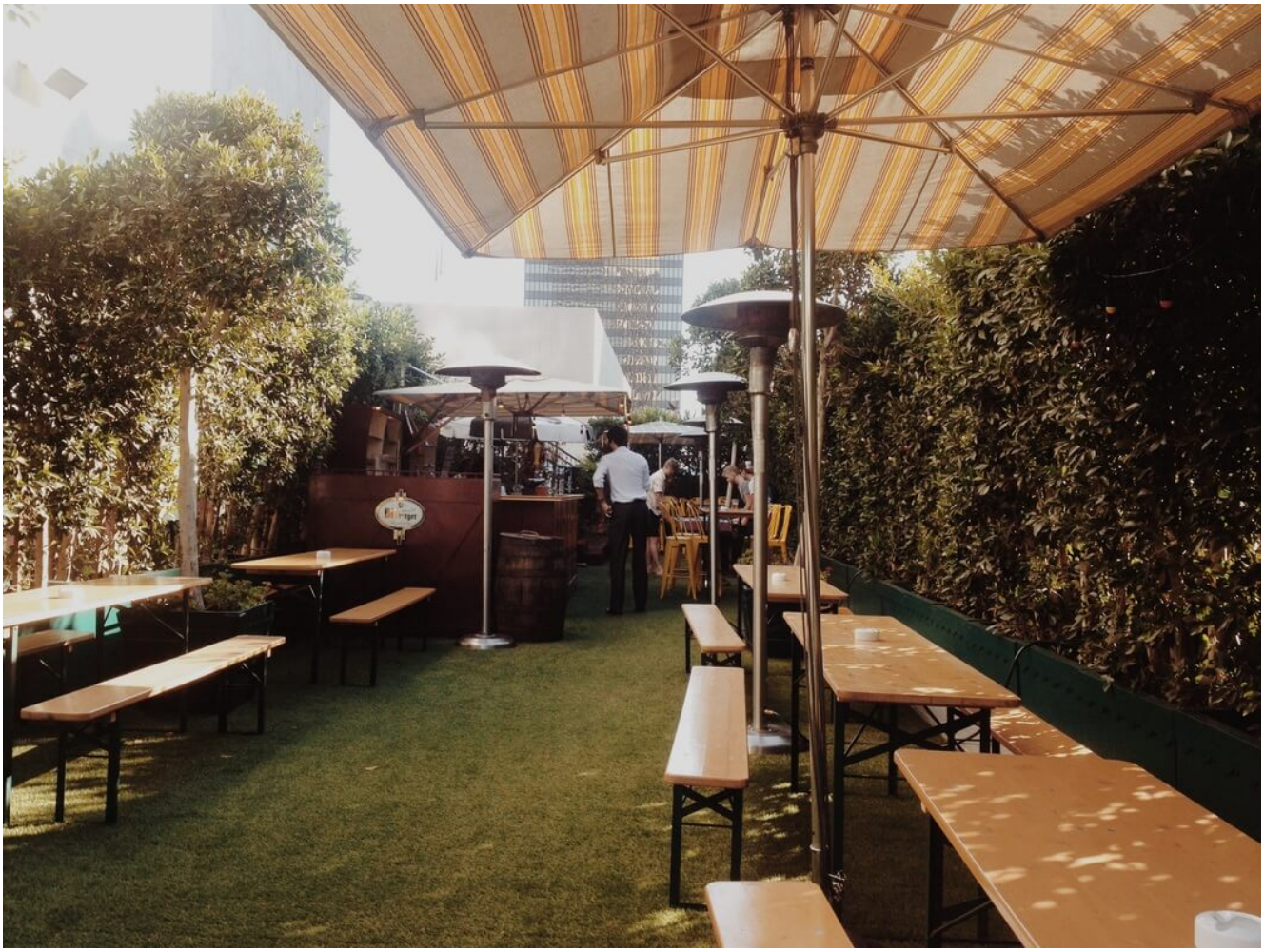
When friends visit from out of town I always recommend this hotel amongst a few others, mostly because of how unique downtown LA is (it’s come a long way in the past 10 years), and because the Standard in Hollywood really can’t compete with it’s sister across town.



Minimalistic, mod, and very hip – that’s the Standard

There’s a lot to like about this place, but what always comes to mind first is its rooftop area. There’s an incredible infinity pool with 360 degree views of the downtown skyline, signature waterbed pods, and a small version of the

German Biergarten that mimics the feature of the Standard Highline back in NY.



Who can’t turn down a good beer and german sausage? (Vegetarians)

There’s often something going on here every weekend, and most recently they’ve even added a second floor ping pong bar. If personality were the determinant factor in a hotel contest, I think the Standard in Downtown LA would get first place (with the new Mama’s Shelter coming in #2).



Great weather and great views – This is the best place to take advantage of both! Rooftop @ the Standard

The rooms themselves are pretty Standard Standard (that wasn't a typo). You're going to get modern, minimalistic, and slightly quirky. If there's a downside to any of this, it's that the service isn't necessarily the best, and the crowd can be a bit abrasive on certain weekends as it attracts the local scenester crowd of LA. That's a whole 'nother subject.

PROS:

- It's got a lot to offer just within the hotel, I come to this place even when i'm not staying here
- Location wise, downtown LA is great and it's only getting better
- The rates are always pretty competitive here

CONS:

- Although I would never say the service is terrible, it's not a forte for this hotel – it's almost too cool to worry about service

SECRETS:

- If you want to get a pod, be sure to reserve one way ahead of time, as they get taken very quickly

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Downtown LA is one of the fastest growing and gentrifying areas in Los Angeles. There's almost too much to list and it grows every day, but I really recommend eating at Redbird and if you're a sushi fan Sugarfish (which is incredible sushi at a great price and an LA staple).

REVIEW: The Hotel Del Coronado

The Hotel Del Coronado is a hotel that holds a special place in my heart. Having grown up in Southern California, my family spent many summers down in San Diego, and one of the go-to spots that we would always visit was the Hotel Del Coronado. It was always the family tradition to spend some time on the beach in front of the Hotel Del and to grab one of their juicy burgers while watching the sun set over the Pacific.

However, it was NEVER a family tradition to *stay* at the Hotel Del Coronado. Why? Because the rooms were either in the old "Victorian" tower and old and stuffy, or they were in the "newer" tower which was just not quite as nice as the Loews Coronado Resort.

Everything else about the property was exquisite – the public spaces had an old school elegance, the elevator harkens back to the 1800's with manual controls, and the ballroom is a

sight to behold by itself, but we never chose to actually stay in the rooms at the Hotel Del.

This changed recently, because as of 2014, a major renovation was completed at the Hotel Del Coronado. The rooms in both towers have received significant changes, and the public spaces have been refreshed, with special care taken to preserve the national treasure that the hotel actually is (it’s a historic site – and yes, some swear it’s haunted ;).



One of the renovated rooms at the Hotel Del Coronado – I can now highly recommend it!



The Thanksgiving dinner at the ballroom is exquisite and HIGHLY recommended

The best part of the Hotel Del Coronado is that it embodies the beachy California vacation vibe that so many try to replicate but very few actually achieve. It also has so much history to it that it's practically a given that should a president or governmental figure visit San Diego they stay at the Hotel Del Coronado.

Service is also incredible at the Hotel Del, but it's much better if you choose to stay in the Victorian historic side of the hotel, this is something I highly recommend doing – especially post-renovation.

If you do visit the Hotel Del, be sure to visit the underground gallery and marvel at the history of the place –

it’s all setup in a mini-museum type setting. All in all, I am happy to now be able to recommend the Hotel Del Coronado as a prime property that everyone should stay at if they visit Coronado island.



Get your burgers at the pool and just marvel at the great weather and the historic beauty of the Del

PROS:

- Location wise, the Hotel Del Coronado is the best place to be on Coronado Island, the nearest competition is the Loews and it’s located in a more rural area down the

peninsula
- The hotel has so much character, it’s not just another cookie cutter resort

CONS:

- The service could be slightly better, it’s not bad by any means but it doesn’t necessarily reach the levels of smaller Ritz properties or the Mandarin Oriental’s standards
- The pool is a bit small and has very little seating

SECRETS:

- Try brunch at the ballroom, its better food than the rest of the restaurants, and the environment is stunning

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- Rent a surrey (four person bike) and just ride around Coronado island. It’s a great way to spend the day and enjoy the beauty of the island, the greenery of the golf course on Coronado, and to check out all the little shops around the peninsula

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REVIEW: Montage Laguna Beach



The Montage is one of those hotels I've grouped into "wedding hotels" of Laguna Beach – alongside the The Ritz-Carlton Laguna Niguel and the The Monarch Beach Resort in Dana Point. They're all relatively close to each other, within a few miles, and they all have very similar features – grand entrances and public spaces, large pools with lots of chairs to lay out in, wedding-ready venues within the properties, and very similarly styled rooms that won't offend anyone.

These aren't the types of hotels i'd normally recommend when traveling – because I feel that there are so many different options out there to spend your money at and my personal preferences skew towards the unique. However, between the three I would recommend the Montage or the Ritz. Why you ask? The Montage and Ritz both have a bit more character than the Monarch Beach. They feel like they have a bit more soul and offer something slightly different than the standard large beachside resort. That being said, you really can't go wrong

with any one of these hotels.



My favorite part of the Montage is the restaurant there – The Studio

The best part of the Montage Laguna Beach is the separate standing restaurant the Studio. It's got incredible fare and the view during sunset is outstanding, if you stay at the Montage (or if you're around the Montage Laguna) I highly recommend visiting the Studio.

PROS:

- Grounds are incredibly beautiful, and the restaurant "The Studio" is a great place to check out
- Location is superb, within walking distance of Laguna Beach shops
- Service is impeccable, on par with the Ritz in Laguna and slightly better than the Monarch Beach

CONS:

- The decor, although classic, is slightly bland
- The pool area and cabanas can be pretty crowded on weekends when the hotel is full

SECRETS:

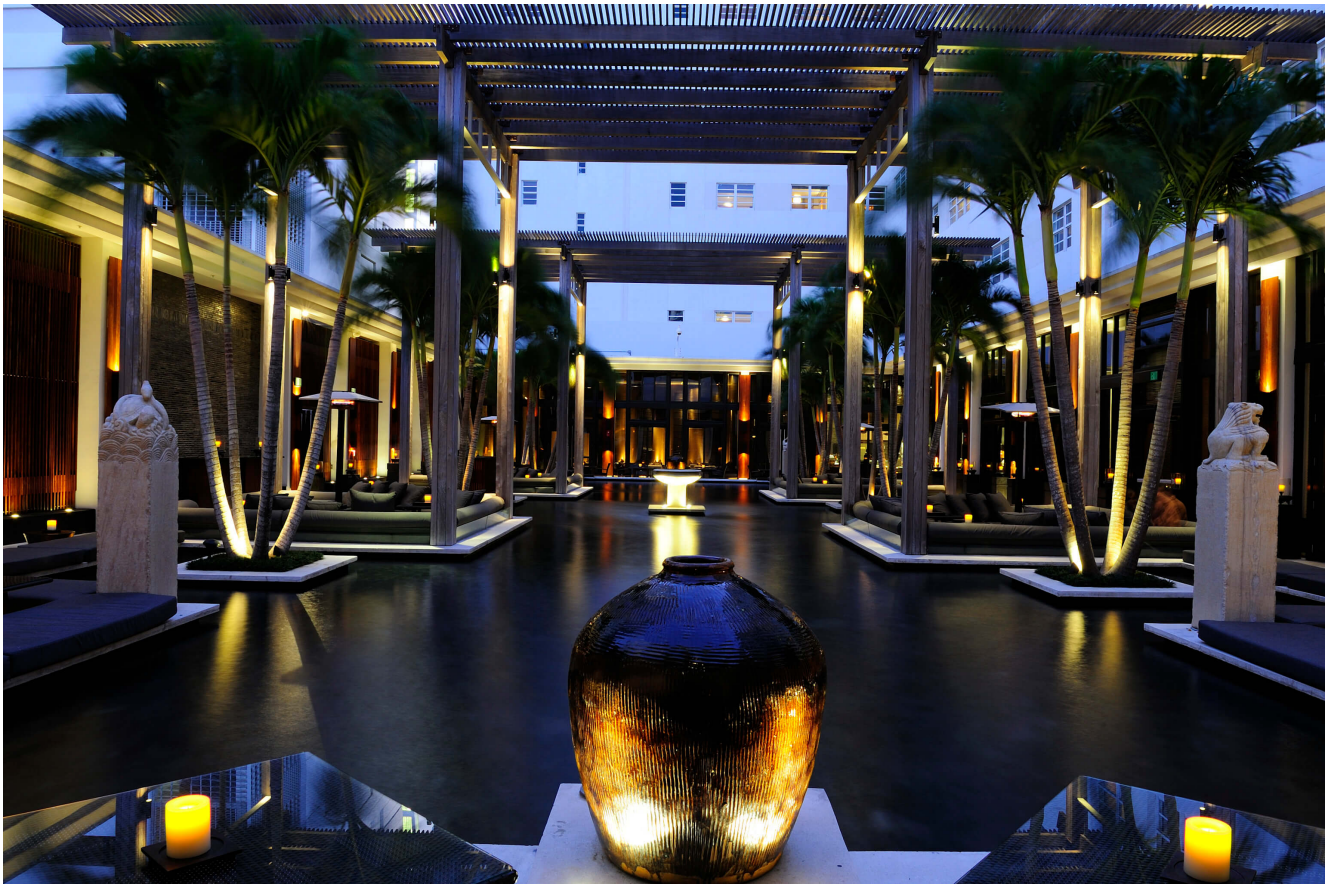
- Ask for a room further away from the lobby in order to gain more privacy. The hotel has some more secluded wings which are great for a romantic getaway

OTHER THINGS IN THE AREA:

- Who doesn’t like ice cream? Or its Italian brethren – Gelato? One of my favorite spots down the street from the Montage is Gelato Paradiso. Take a walk, grab some ice cream, and enjoy the quaintness that is Laguna Beach

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REVIEW: The Setai Miami



The Setai is quite a fancy place – this area outside of the main lobby is where they regularly hold bikini shows during swim week in Miami

This hotel was one of my first forays into luxury travel shortly after I made my first monies (I can't say money – I swear). Consequently, it holds a dear place in my heart, and I have been back many times since the hotel was first opened back in 2004. It's gone through quite a few owners and phases since, and I can't say that it's as great as it was back in 2004-2007 but it is still an amazing property and still ranks at the top of my list for quality of service and luxuriousness.

The first thing you notice when you enter the Setai is the very unique decor. This is because the builders were Indonesian and imported most of the materials from Southeast Asia, opting for teak from that region and exotic manta ray skins and handmade items imported specifically for the hotel from Indo, Philippines, and Malaysia.

The result is stunning, with a sexy Asian elegance that you won't find in many US based hotels other than a few select Mandarin Orientals (like the one in Vegas).

There are two distinct areas to the hotel, the standard hotel room side with its own lobby, and the suite towers which have their own entrance and smaller lobby.

The pool is also one of my favorite aspects of this hotel, with three pools each at a different temperature so that you can roam from one to the other based on your whim.



Three pools each with their own temperature

I highly recommend checking out the suite towers when you book, although they are not reasonably priced by a long shot, they're worthy of special occasions, and the corner units with their floor to ceiling glass walls and the height of the building (it's one of the tallest in South Beach) makes for spectacular views that you won't find anywhere else on Collins Ave.



The Asian theme is throughout, the rooms are relatively small by suite standards but the glass makes you forget about the size

Before the Fontainebleau was rebuilt, and the Soho Beach House was established this was always my first choice, but since those two have come into existence I only choose the Setai if there's a great deal to be had.

The service is bar-none though, and the concierge service is exquisite. However, since the changes in ownership some of the previous amenities have been deleted, including complimentary service in a fleet of Range Rover's and Rolls-Royces.

PROS:

- You can't beat the views here, it's one of the tallest buildings on South Beach
- The pools are spectacular, and if you want to relax in South Beach it really doesn't get better than this.

CONS:

- The price is pretty high even for a luxury hotel

- The service is not as good as it used to be, and they have deleted many amenities

SECRETS:

- Try out the Passion Fruit Martini, it’s one of my favorite drinks ever, and i’m not into sweet drinks normally. It has a nice spicy kick to it!
- If you are trying to get a great rate, google “Setai Miami Rentals”. The condo units owned here often have great rental rates, especially off-season



Order the Passion-Fruit Chili Martini (or two)

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

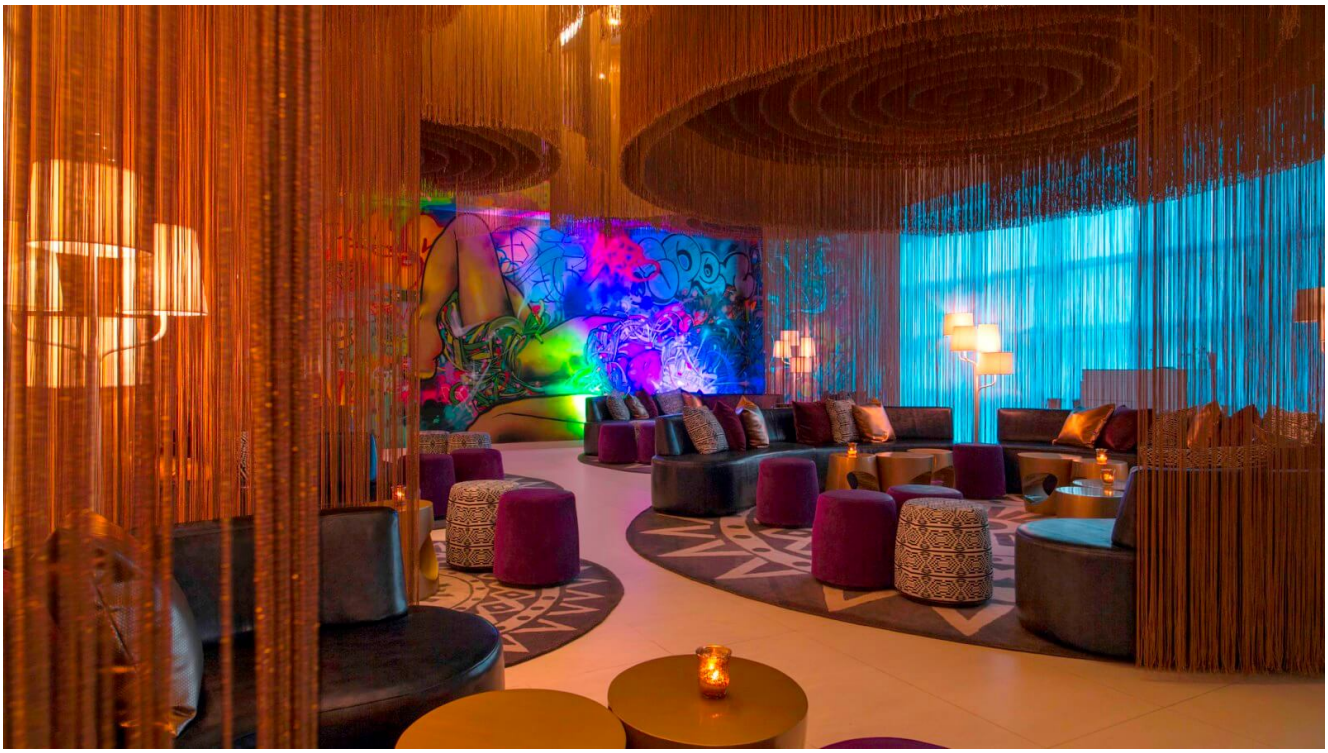
- I’ve mentioned some of these in my other post from South Beach here

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REVIEW: W Bogota – It's real Colombian here!

This has got to be one of the cooler W hotels in terms of design and style. Its a small one but its great location and great room rates make it a great home base if you find yourself in the city of Bogota.

What you immediately notice when you enter this property is the moodiness of the place. This is not unlike most W hotels which have slightly darker surroundings and evoke a sense of sensualness and mystery.



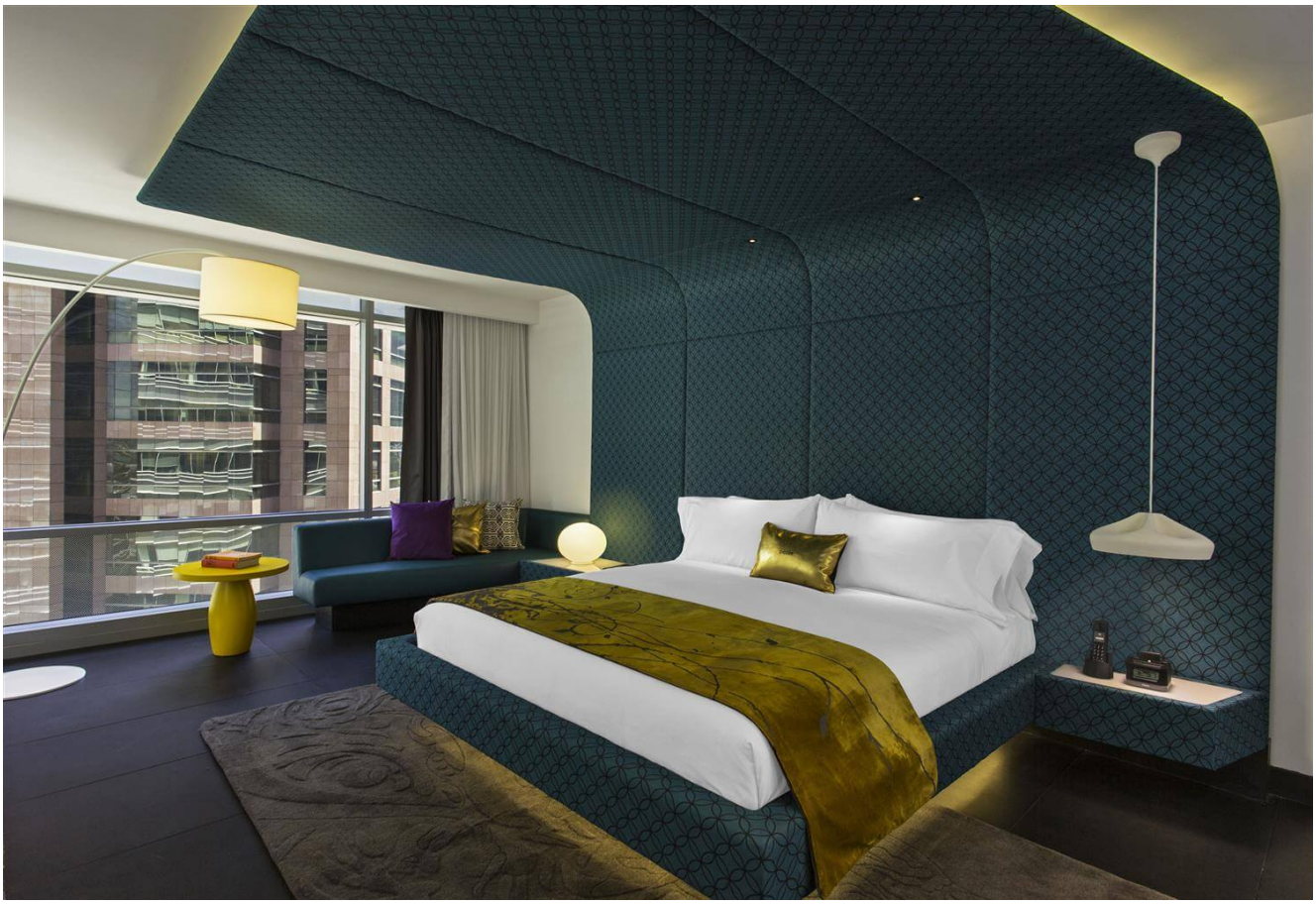
That's one sexy lounge. It's also a great place to hang out in before you head out for the night!

If you book early enough, check out the suites – they go for great prices, and they're totally worth the price. For less than $200 I was able to get a suite with its own game room and pool table, and this was during peak holiday season!

The service was above average for a W hotel, they were

extremely accommodating when we needed to check in early and even though the room wasn’t ready they gave us complimentary spa access in order for us to freshen ourselves from our journey.

The rooms themselves were in great condition as of this writing, and had a whimsical and charming quality to them. Especially awesome were the bathrooms, with LED lighting in the showers and gold fixtures that couldn’t help but remind me of something that would be in the infamous Pablo Escobar Mansion.



The gold touches really make this room pop visually. It’s got some of the most interesting contemporary furnishings i’ve ever seen in a room. Clean yet warm and inviting



Gold tiles, a gold shower, and gold fixtures. Remember, gold is best!

PROS:

- Its got a bathroom that stands out and makes you wanna smile
- The service is on par with some higher tier hotels
- The rates are phenomenal for the quality of hotel you are getting into

CONS:

- It’s a smaller property so it doesn’t have a grand feeling to it

SECRETS:

- They really appreciate SPG loyalty here so remember to use your SPG card if you have one. Also, they have a disproportionate amount of suites so it’s relatively easy to upgrade at the front desk, I highly recommend

trying that out if you didn’t book a suite ahead of time

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- You really should check out Tabula when you’re here. Anthony Bourdain recommends this restaurant and so do I.

The Best Credit Cards to get for travel

I know this subject has been covered by specific sites such as The Points Guy and Nerd Wallet but I wanted to throw my hat in the ring and give an opinion, as sometimes those sites are a bit biased due to their sponsorships and advertisements.
I have at one point or another owned almost every credit card related to rewards travel, but the picture above shows what’s currently in my wallet. I’ll let you know why I have each one in there and give you some secrets.

REVIEW: Rosewood London (It’s pretty awesome)

This hotel is one that makes an immediate impression on you the minute you walk through the double gates.

The movie-esque entrance with gates manned by attendants in British Peacoats leads you to a courtyard complete with

British house cars – Jaguars, Land Rovers, Aston Martin’s. This is one hotel that takes elegance and sophistication to a completely different level.

REVIEW: The Nines in Portland



The Nines in Portland is an interesting property. It was recently remodeled, and has a lot to offer in terms of location and contemporary style, but what detracted me from giving it a full recommendation are the smallish rooms and

mediocre bathrooms.

Located centrally in downtown Portland – the Nines is the hip luxury hotel in the SPG group. It's got a very cool farm to table restaurant, a very comfy lobby that I could spend hours in, and really great service from the staff.

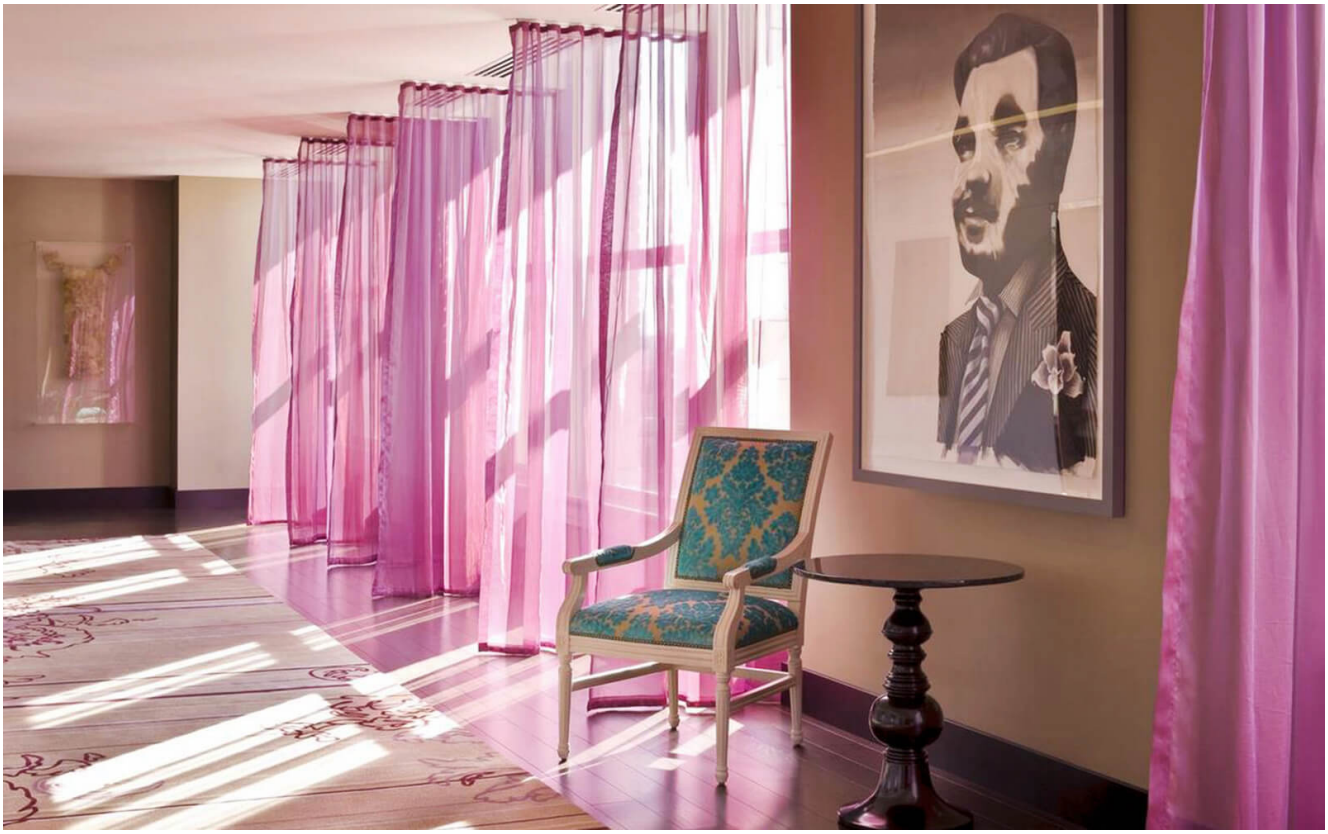


The rooms are small, but luxuriously appointed – however they do need a little more love and upkeep

I did get a chance to visit some other high end hotels in Portland, and I will say, if you're visiting the city – you should still stick with the Nines. It's got the combination of style and luxury – even if it's getting a bit long in the tooth, but location is very important in a city where you can walk to most places, and the service goes a long way.



The coolest part of this hotel is the greenhouse above the entire lobby – It gives what little natural light there is in Portland a chance at illuminating the interior of the building



Translucent pink curtains? It’s gotta be hip…

PROS:

- It’s trendy, contemporary, and I like the interior decor of this place
- The service is great – they’re attentive and quick at handling issues

CONS:

- Rooms are small and could use some upgrades

SECRETS:

- The bar in the lobby has an incredible selection of dark liquors

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- If you love Nike, I HIGHLY recommend getting some coupons off of Craiglist and checking out the factory store, there’s lots of great savings to be had there!
- Walk around downtown and just wander – there’s lots of

cool little nooks and crannies around, this is a town where you can just casually meander around without a plan and have a great time doing it

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REVIEW: The Roosevelt – A Hollywood Staple

The Roosevelt – I have been to this hotel many times, because it's the center of Hollywood when it comes to hotels. Drop by this place any random weekend and there's an event happening, the pool is packed with fun-loving people, and the bars are flowing.

REVIEW: How to upgrade your room for close to free!

So how do you go from your normal room to that upgrade? Well there's quite a few ways to do it! Here are my secrets that i've used in the past.

1. **It is always better to check in REALLY LATE –** This is how it works, if you check in very late, many times the rooms will have already been allocated and the hotel will know its inventory for that day and for the next. Cancellations will also have been logged in.
2. **ALWAYS REGISTER FOR MEMBERSHIP REWARDS** – If you are not part of the program of a particular hotel chain, be sure

to register ahead of time. Then when you arrive at the front desk, let the manager know that you recently registered and are a new member of X (pick your hotel group), and that you are looking to learn more about the benefits of moving your business over to the new group. Ie: “I am a longtime member of Marriott’s Rewards but am looking to move my business over to SPG, can you please explain what kind of upgrades you would be willing to offer?”

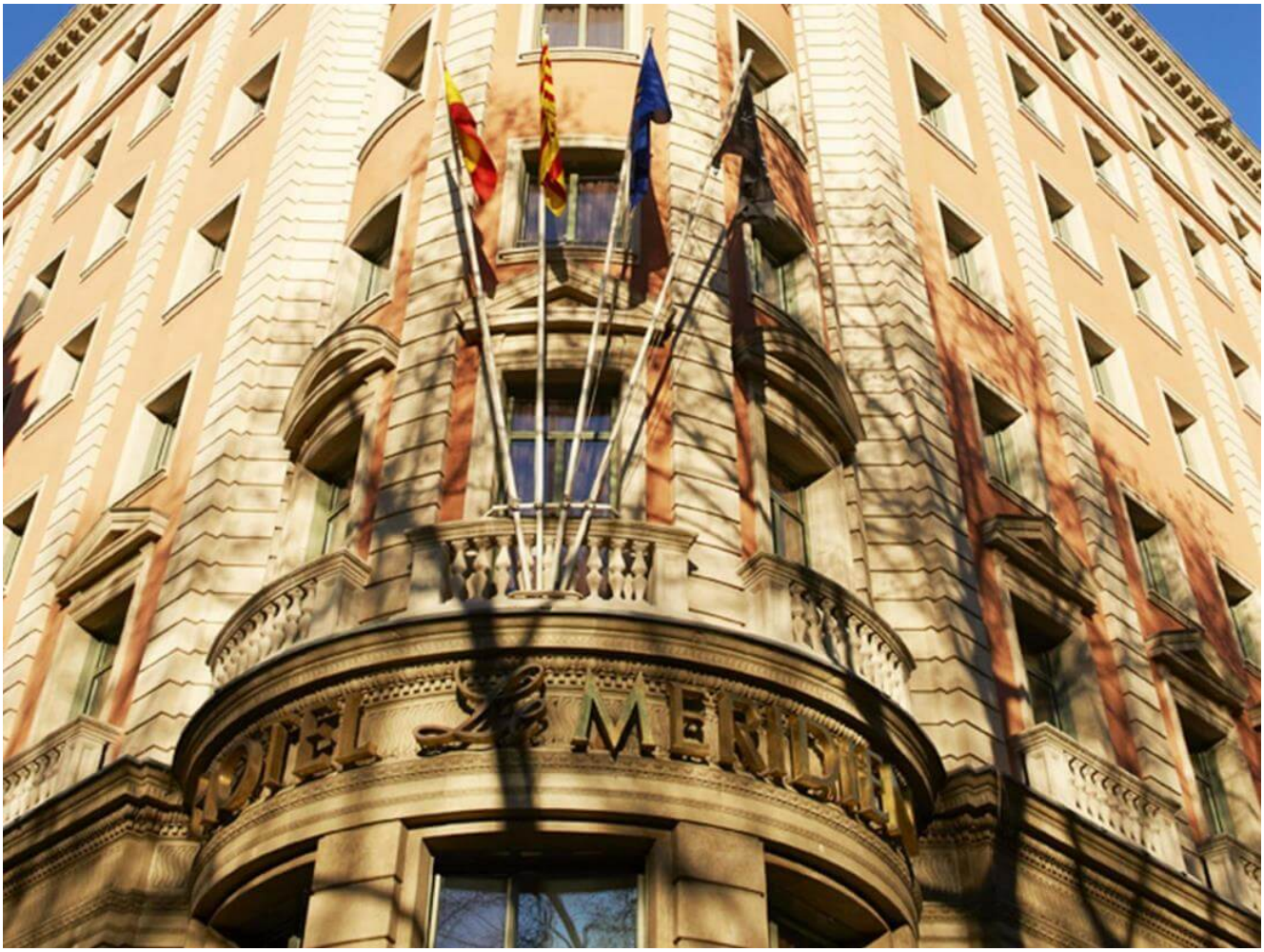
3. **SIMPLY ASK FOR UPGRADES** – Upselling at the front desk is the job of the hotelier working there. They get commissions for upselling so its in their best interest to get you an upgraded room. Also don’t take what price they quote as the end-all-be-all. Negotiate!
4. **PULL UP HOTEL TONIGHT RATES** – If you don’t have this app, get it immediately! You can then pull up the rates on Hotel Tonight for different room categories (which often are lower than the rack rates at the hotel), and kindly ask the hotel to match the rates.
5. **OFFER TO WRITE A GREAT REVIEW OF THE MANAGER OR EMPLOYEE ON THE SPOT** – Hotels rely heavily on Tripadvisor reviews. Every review counts too. Leverage your ability to review and get an upgrade out of it! At the very lease you’ll get great service.

Hope these all help you get better room upgrades and improve your hotel experiences for future stays!

Love,

Chris

REVIEW: The Le Meridien Barcelona



This hotel is a little gem in the middle of Las Ramblas. Le Meridien's are often overlooked by travelers in lieu of larger name chain hotels, but they usually provide the boutique service and luxury that you would expect to find at something comparably higher in price.

I chose this hotel for an extended stay in Barcelona, which resulted in me actually calling this place my home for a bit of time in late Fall a few years back. It is set in a very centralized part of Barcelona – right in the middle of Las Ramblas, which is essentially the main street in the city. This made for extremely easy access to shops, restaurants, bars, cafe's, and pretty much everything else you could ask

for when roaming and getting lost in Spain's best city metropolis (Madrid just isn't Barcelona if you ask me).

The lobby was a great place to have an afternoon cocktail, and the rooms were modernly appointed and clean with great attentive staff. Although the property has over 200 rooms it felt much more like a boutique hotel where they knew your name and service was remarkably quick everytime I needed something brought to my room.



Modern rooms here felt cozy, sophisticated, and noticeably well insulated, making for some very restful nights in the city

The hotel really embodies something which I find to be an epitome of European cities that have been around for centuries but have since grown up with the times, beautiful old world exteriors – but with modern luxurious interiors. This is the city of Gaudi after all, and interior decor and character and soul should be present at any hotel worth its price of admission. I felt as if Miro inspired some of the furnishings, colors, and overall decor of this place.



Modern bathrooms with granite, wood, and clean lines made this place feel like it had more character than your average luxury hotel

Of course, the best part of this hotel is and always will be its location. I don’t think Le Meridien will ever let go of this property. I highly recommend it if you’re visiting Barcelona.



Barcelona is all about lounging, and this lobby was built specifically for that purpose. Kudos to SPG & Le Meridien!

PROS:

- Great lobby to socialize in and hang out during nighttime hours
- Rooms were modern but with lots of character and warmth
- Staff was very attentive for what is a relatively large hotel
- The location couldn’t be any better for walking to lots of great destinations

CONS:

- There are certainly many newer choices and I haven’t reviewed some other top hotels in Barcelona but this one is a solid choice

SECRETS:

- Eat breakfast here at the restaurant downstairs, it’s magnificent

THINGS TO DO IN THE AREA:

- I’m biased, but I think everyone should visit the Miro museum while in Barcelona

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REVIEW: Melia Cohiba Havana in Cuba



Yes I went to Cuba, and yes it was a pretty awesome time. If you are thinking of going I highly recommend booking immediately. The country is in flux and massive amounts of investment is going in and when that happens things will just

not be the same.

Part of the charm of Cuba is how quaint it is. It's lifted straight out of the 1950's and 60's, complete with oil burning Studebakers and bright yellow and green Ladas, buildings with the architecture of a completely different era, and sensibilities of the people that you wouldn't find anywhere else in the world. Whatever romantic notions of Cuba you might have, you'll want to experience them in person before it all changes.

Hotels in Cuba are far and few in between, especially when it comes to luxury accommodations. The Melia chain is a well respected Spanish hotel chain with quite a few properties just in Cuba alone. This is one of their premier properties located right on the waterfront and in the center of Havana.

We found this property through pure serendipity, as I was planning a last minute bachelor party for one of my best friends and it just so happened to fall on "Cigar Festival week" in Cuba. This was almost a non-starter for our trip until we found the Melia Cohiba.

When we got to the hotel we realized something that all American travelers should be aware of. They don't accept credit cards from US banks! So travelers beware, bring lots of cash!



Our rooms were pretty large and decently appointed, but if you don’t like hard beds – well, tough luck

Rooms were decently sized, clean and hospitable, but in most other countries this 5-star establishment would be more comparable to a 3-star hotel, imagine a Garden Inn or basic Hilton property.



This is the best it’ll ever look at a 5-star resort in Cuba. Come in with modified expectations and you’ll be just fine!

Staff were extremely courteous, the concierge was beyond

helpful in a country where internet is sparse and you can't just Google or Yelp something on a whim, and the bar was open till very late at night – also a godsend when you're not a native Spanish speaker and television options are scarce at best.

My favorite part of the hotel? The concierge – whom was kind enough to setup activities for us on a strict budget (remember how I said how we did not anticipate having to pay the hotel in cash? Well that took a big chunk out of what we had on hand). A rum & cigar factory visit, a ride around town in a convertible, a picnic up in the hills, and even a visit to a Paladres that was highly recommended. If we had not stayed at this hotel, we would've been SOL what with the last minute planning and lack of information accessible to us.

PROS:

- The concierges at the hotel really made our trip, they knew what to do and how to do it on a budget which was important to our group during this trip, and accommodated some very last minute reservations during what was a very busy week in Havana
- Large rooms which were great for our group, it's actually very tough to find 2-3 bedroom options at hotels which aren't exorbitantly expensive

CONS:

- There was a certain air of staleness throughout the property, but this was probably just because Cuba is still in its early stages of modernization. Take it for what it is when you go!
- The pool food is absolutely terrible at the hotel, I highly recommend against it. Go for the buffet which is much better on the second floor

SECRETS:

- Buy cigars at the hotel, you’re less likely to get fake ones from here than at shady vendors out in the city

OTHER THINGS TO DO IN HAVANA:

- Check out the dance halls and bars and clubs in the city. The Cuban people are extremely kind and they love to dance and you’re not getting the full experience if you don’t go out and mingle and dance with the locals. I promise you’ll have a great time!